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Napolitano Shows Dems Can Look Good in Red

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By Ned Farquhar

In Phoenix, the cab drivers will tell you they think Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano is doing a very good job.

For five years I have asked Phoenix cab drivers what they think of her. Last week, my airport shuttle driver said, "I'm basically a Republican. But I like her because she's decisive and she gets things done." They all say that.

Arizona's a red state, strongly oriented to the GOP. Napolitano is a nationally respected Democrat, like several of the other practical, effective Democratic governors in the West who have high poll ratings.

When she came into office five years ago, she inherited a \$1.3 billion budget deficit. Using skills honed as a young budget analyst for Sen. Pete Domenici (who was a clear-eyed budget hawk on the Senate Budget Committee in the old days before Washington Republicans lost their minds), she sat down with the Arizona Senate leader on one side, the House leader on the other. Then she ran circles around them by knowing the content and tricks throughout the Arizona budget. They couldn't keep up.

Napolitano balanced it despite the Republicans' intransigence. She went on to veto dozens and dozens of bills. The public responded: Leadership at last!

Since then Napolitano has pounded new education policies through an unwilling legislature. She has started a needed dialogue on growth, which is consuming the metro areas and even the backcountry of Arizona, the fastest-growing state. People talk about her as a potential U.S. attorney general.

All that and she grew up in New Mexico.

Several months ago I wrote a column about Utah's GOP Gov. Jon Huntsman. Recently Huntsman has been in the news because of the coal mine collapse that appears, at this point, to have claimed nine lives, including three rescuers. He is handling the disaster as well as he could have (although the mine owner's response to the situation smacks of the hubris, arrogance, and failure to comprehend that we have grown familiar with among coal operators nationwide).

In her first term, Napolitano was likewise challenged by a huge issue— the explosion of a gasoline pipeline that caused a severe shortfall in gas supplies and a sharp spike in gas prices, the kind of thing some governors would never get over. But she was practical and decisive, and the public supported her through the crisis.

Now these two pragmatists (Napolitano and Huntsman) are cooperating in the Western Climate Initiative recently stimulated by California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson. The goal of the project is to set up a regional system that will cut climate-changing carbon emissions by at least 15 percent before 2020, and even more sharply in the years after that. So far six states are actively participating— two led by GOP governors (Utah and California) and four led by Democrats (New Mexico, Oregon, Washington, and Arizona).

It's not an easy task for sprawling, energy-producing Southwestern states to reduce carbon emissions. The population in Arizona is expected to more than double by 2050. That means a lot more driving and a trend toward much higher emissions.

For Napolitano to commit to reduce emissions so sharply is a major commitment— not one she takes lightly, and not one that can be met with high-flying rhetoric. She'll need to work closely with the independently elected Arizona Corporations Commission, which regulates electricity in most of the state under a constitutional charter, and she will have to bring along a reluctant and skeptical GOP legislature.

Sometimes she sounds more like Hercules than like the hard-charging Italian from Albuquerque who is changing Arizona politics.

But she sees the threat of global warming here in the Southwest. We will have much less water available, worsening the already hostile interstate relations regarding management of the overallocated Colorado River, stressing our habitats and species, creating conditions for more catastrophic wildfire, and (ironically) increasing electricity demand for overheated residents who live to air condition. (Phoenix is experiencing its hottest-ever summer, expected to exceed the record of 28 days over 110 degrees.)

She might end up in the Cabinet. She might end up in the U.S. Senate when John McCain steps down, as expected in 2010. Whatever her future, she's shown there's room for smart Democrats even in a place like Arizona.

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